

Jesus' last Passover in the Synoptics and in John.

There is an inherent contradiction in the timing of the Passion Passover in the Synoptics and in John. The Synoptics make it clear that Jesus celebrated a Passover meal with his disciples, while John's Gospel says that the Passover was celebrated the following day when Jesus was crucified.

The Synoptics say that the Last Supper was on "the first day of unleavened bread, when they sacrificed the Passover" (Mk. 14:11// Mt. 26:17; Lk. 22:7). The term "first day of unleavened bread" would normally refer to the 15th Nisan, which was the first day on which unleavened bread was not permitted in the house, but it can also refer to the 14th when the unleavened bread was removed from the houses. The second phrase, "when they sacrificed the Passover", clearly points to the 14th, on the afternoon of which the Passover sacrifices were slaughtered. According to Scripture this occurred in the evening, but in practice they sacrificed them from 2 pm in order process them all at the Temple. John omits this time reference before the Last Supper but says that the priests who visited Pilate the next day "entered not into the Praetorium, that they might not be defiled, but might eat the Passover".¹

There have been many attempts at explaining this difference, which have all been summarised well by Jeremias in his *Eucharistic Words of Jesus*.² There have been many unsatisfactory explanations, the most common of which is that the Last Supper was not a Passover meal. The term "Paschal" or "Passover" occurs four times in Mark's account of the preparation of the meal, though it occurs nowhere in the account of the meal itself. This has led some to assume that two separate accounts have become linked, and that the Last Supper was not a Passover celebration. Jeremias, however, gives details concerning 14 features of this meal which indicate that it was a Passover celebration.³ The two most satisfactory solutions have been those of Billerbeck and Pickl.

Billerbeck⁴ argued that in the year of Jesus' death the Sadducees and Pharisees disagreed about the date of the new moon, so that their calendars were different by one day. The Pharisees celebrated Passover on one day and the Sadducees on the next. This is a reasonable explanation which Jeremias finds it difficult to refute, except to say that it lacks evidence. It is well known that there were disputes about the start of the lunar month, but there is no evidence that this ever resulted in two dates for celebrating the Passover. Billerbeck also fails to explain how the Pharisees would be able to get their sacrifices processed by the mainly Sadducean priesthood.

J. Pickl⁵ on the other hand said that it was a regular occurrence for Galileans to sacrifice Passover sacrifices on 13th while those from Judea kept to the normal 14th. Part of his argument was based

¹ Other records of the date are found in the Gospel of Peter 2:5 which says that Jesus' trial and crucifixion took place "before the first day of Unleavened Bread" and bSanh.43a which may or may not refer to Jesus: "on the Day of Preparation, Jeshu was hanged". Both of these support the Johannine date, though the Gospel of Peter is probably dependant on John.

² Jeremias, Joachim, *The Eucharistic words of Jesus*, trans. N. Perrin from the German 3rd ed., *Die Abendmahlsworte Jesu* with the author's revision to July 1964 (London: SCM, 1966)

³ Jeremias, *Eucharistic Words* 26-88.

⁴ Strack, Hermann Leberecht, and Billerbeck, Paul, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch* (München: Beck, 1922-1961) vol. II 847-53

⁵ Jeremias, *Eucharistic Words* 24

on Josephus, which Jeremias shows to be false, but his most important evidence comes from a curious passage in Mishnah:

Where they are accustomed to do work on the ninth of Ab, they do it. Where they are accustomed not to do work, they do not do it. And in every place disciples of sages refrain [from labor]. Rabban Simeon b. Gamaliel says, "Under all circumstances should a man act on his own like a disciple of a sage."

And sages say, "In Judah they did work on the eve of Passover up to noon, but in Galilee they did not do so at all."

And as to the night [before the fourteenth of Nisan], the House of Shammai prohibit [doing work at that time]. And the House of Hillel permit - up to sunrise. (mPes.4.5)

Mishnah gives no explanation for this variation in custom. Pickl suggested that the Galileans forbade work on the day before Passover ('the eve of Passover') because they sacrificed their Passover lambs or goats on this day. The reason for this would presumably be that there was not enough time to process all the sacrifices on one day, so the Temple priests let some bring them a day early. Jeremias concludes that the conjecture of Pickl is reasonable, but there is no evidence that the Galileans or anyone else ever brought their Passover sacrifices on the 13th.

Both of these hypotheses have been given added weight by a recent argument in Maurice Casey's book on the *Aramaic Sources of Mark*.⁶ He points to a rabbinic debate concerning a Passover sacrifices which had not been designated as a Passover sacrifice by the person offering it:

The Passover which one slaughtered on the morning of the fourteenth [of Nisan] not for its own name ["under some other name"] - R. Joshua declares valid, as if it were slaughtered on the thirteenth [of Nisan]. Ben Baterah declares invalid, as if it were slaughtered at twilight [of the fourteenth].

Said Simeon ben Azzai, "I have received a tradition from the seventy-two elder[s], on the day on which they seated R. Eleazar b. Azariah in session, that: "all animal offerings which are eaten, which were slaughtered not for their own name, are fit, but they do not go to the owner's credit in fulfillment of an obligation, except for the Passover and the sin offering." And Ben Azzai [thereby] added only the burnt offering. But sages did not agree with him. (mZeb.1:3).

Casey argues that although Joshua and Ben Baterah are Yavnean scholars whose teachings date from after 70 CE, it is likely that this debate took place before 70 CE because they were unlikely to invent ways in which the cult had been carried out wrongly. This argument is unsafe, because the whole context of the debate indicates that it took place at Yavneh after 70 CE. However, it is likely that they were correct in their knowledge of pre-70 CE customs, and that the tradition which they are discussing dates back to the previous generation.

What this passage shows is that some Jews were bringing Passover sacrifices to be sacrificed on the afternoon of the 13th, and they were calling them something else, perhaps a Fellowship Offering, so that the priest would process them without question. Casey suggests that some people brought sacrifices early in order to avoid the rush, and that the priesthood and the Pharisees turned a blind eye to this for the practical purposes of getting all the sacrifices processed.⁷

Casey himself does not use this to explain the contradictions between the Synoptics and John. He says that Mark used the phrase 'first day of Unleavened bread' to emphasise that Jesus was

⁶ Casey, Maurice, *Aramaic sources of Mark's gospel*, Society for New Testament studies monograph series 102 (Cambridge: CUP, 1998) 223-25. These conclusions were first published as "The Date Of The Passover Sacrifices And Mark 14:12" Tyndale Bulletin 48 (1998) 245-47

⁷ Casey, *Aramaic sources* 223-25

celebrating on the scripturally correct day, and that this could not be taken for granted because some Jews sacrificed on the 13th, as seen in mZeb.1.3. Indeed, Casey thinks that John's account is plainly false and driven by a theological agenda. He criticises the attempts at harmonisation by "fundamentalists, whose absolute convictions in the truth of the whole of scripture would be infringed if John were wrong".⁸ However, Casey's new insight does help to solve the contradiction between John and the Synoptics, because it gives us the evidence which was lacking in the arguments of Billerbeck and Pickl. Both of these arguments suggested that some Jews brought Passover sacrifices on the 13th, but neither brought any evidence that this had ever happened. The debate in mZeb.1.3 provides this evidence because it shows that rabbis at the end of the first century knew that Passover sacrifices were sometimes brought on the 13th.

Billerbeck and Pickl had completely different suggestions for the reason why sacrifices were brought on the 13th. Pickl, like Casey, thought it was simply because there were too many sacrifices to process in one day. Billerbeck thought that it was because some people genuinely felt that the 13th was actually the 14th, because of a dispute about the beginning of the month. This same uncertainty is seen in the debate in mZeb.1.3. Both Joshua and Ben Baterah accept that one could bring a sacrifice on the 13th, but they disagreed about the reason. Is one allowed to bring a sacrifice early because of the pressure of numbers, or is one allowed to bring it early because one thinks the 13th is actually the 14th? The test case for their debate is the morning of the 14th. If it was a matter of processing all the sacrifices, the morning of the 14th would be acceptable, but if it was a matter of regarding the 13th as the 14th, only the afternoons of the 13th and the 14th would be acceptable.

The debate, as recorded in Mishnah, started with the earlier tradition in mZeb.1.1 that sacrifices offered with the wrong designation were still valid, except for Passover sacrifices offered on the afternoon of the 14th, and Sin Offerings offered at any time. This tradition is debated by rabbis of the generation immediately following the destruction of the Temple in mZeb.1.2-4. Part of this debate concerns the reason why wrongly designated Passover offerings offered at the correct time were invalid, while wrongly designated Passover offerings offered at the wrong time were valid. This seems to be the wrong way round, and begs the question: Why would anyone offer a Passover offering at the wrong time and with the wrong designation? Both Joshua and Ben Baterah assume that the answer lies in the habit of some people who brought their Passover sacrifice on the 13th instead of the 14th. Their debate in mZeb.1.3 concerns the reason why people should do this.

R. Joshua gives the first opinion, saying that the morning of the 14th is valid because people were allowed to bring offerings on the 13th, presumably to avoid the rush on the 14th. Ben Baterah does not dispute that people can bring offerings on the 13th, but he says that a sacrifice on the morning of the 14th would not be valid because it would be offered outside the permissible time-frame, like a sacrifice which was offered too late, after twilight. Ben Baterah accepts that an offering on the afternoon of the 13th as being the correct time, because as far as the offerer is concerned it is the afternoon of the 14th. In other words, Ben Baterah sides with Billerbeck, saying that people can bring an offering on the 13th if they think that it is the 14th. R. Joshua sides with Pickl, saying that people can bring an offering any time between the afternoon of the 13th and the afternoon of the 14th, so that the priests can process all the sacrifices.

Personally I think that Billerbeck's argument is much stronger. The passage cited by Pickl, about when people stopped work for the Passover, looks simply like a difference in holiday customs. There is nothing to indicate that they celebrated Passover any earlier. It also fits better with the Synoptic account which clearly states that the Last Supper was on the 14th, or on the day that Jesus

⁸ Casey, Maurice, *Is John's Gospel True?* (London: Routledge 1996) 20f.

and his disciples were celebrating as the 14th. John records the time reference of the priests, for whom the month started a day later, so that the following day was the 14th.